

**Testimony of Stephen Catanzarite**  
**Chair, Baden Academy Charter School Planning Committee**  
**Before the**  
**Senate Education Committee**  
**August 25, 2011**

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to come before you today in support of this legislation, its accent on even greater accountability on the part of public charter schools, and its emphasis on fostering the stability and proliferation of innovative and excellent charter schools throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Specifically, I want to discuss with you today the very real need for alternative charter school authorizers in our state.

My name is Stephen Catanzarite, and I am the Managing Director of the Lincoln Park Performing Arts Center in Midland, Pennsylvania. Among other pioneering public education initiatives, the Center is the home of the Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. Time does not permit me to go into this further, but let me just say that Lincoln Park and its chartering district, the Blue Ribbon Midland Borough School District, constitute a model for how a traditional public school and a public charter school can work together to create opportunities for students -- as well as solutions to serious systematic challenges that would not otherwise be possible -- and I invite this committee to consider holding a future hearing at the Lincoln Park Performing Arts Center.

Today, however, I must share with you a less inspiring story. For the last few years, I have served as the chairman of the planning committee for the proposed Baden Academy Charter School, which would be located in Baden, Beaver County, in the Ambridge Area School District. Our vision for Baden Academy is that it will be a K-8 school that integrates and infuses the creative and performing arts throughout all aspects of its curriculum and operations as means for stirring achievement and excellence across the curriculum. That vision has garnered the support of many Pennsylvania families, to the tune of more than 300 pre-enrollments to date. It has not, however, garnered the support of the Ambridge Area School District, which has now twice denied Baden Academy's charter application.

Attached to my testimony today is a copy of a PowerPoint presentation that was created by the Superintendent, Director of Curriculum, and Coordinator of Special Education of the Ambridge Area School District after their review of Baden Academy Charter School's initial application. It was presented to the district's Board of Education in December 2009.

Page 5 of the presentation notes the many offerings Baden Academy will provide to students, including a range of programs in the creative and performing arts, an accent on world languages, and an emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills over “rote memorization.” In addition, the presentation notes that Baden Academy Charter School will offer “a strong curriculum in math, reading, writing, science and social studies...”

Also on page 5, a chart shows a comparison of Baden Academy to Ambridge, highlighting that Baden Academy would offer a full-day Kindergarten program for both 4- and 5-year olds, and 195 instructional days, compared to the standard 180 instructional days.

Furthermore, page 8 of the presentation notes that Baden Academy would operate in “the outstanding facilities” and “park-like setting” of the former Mt. Gallitzin Academy. Page 8 also shows that the Ambridge administrators sought to be proactive in dealing with Baden Academy’s application, saying “if we wait, we will not be able to compete with the Baden Academy Charter School,” and that once the charter school becomes established, it will “be more difficult to deter families from sending children” to Baden Academy.

Despite the positive review of the offerings proposed by Baden Academy’s application, the administration’s recommendations for how to respond all begin with the admonition to “deny the charter school application.” Page 9 of the presentation even lists a number of “preventative steps” to take in response to Baden Academy, which include rallying local school districts in opposing, apparently, the charter school.

In a purely practical sense, Ambridge’s denial is understandable: like all of Pennsylvania’s school districts, Ambridge is made up of good people: teachers, administrators, and school board members who are without a doubt committed to the district’s educational mission and to serving its students. And, like nearly every Pennsylvania school district, Ambridge is struggling to maintain a 19<sup>th</sup>-century operational model that is increasingly unsustainable from a financial standpoint, and – more importantly – is not designed to serve the diverse and unique needs of 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners. Faced with these very real and present challenges, Ambridge has chosen to exercise its authority to block the development of the Baden Academy Charter School and the competition for both students and dollars it will bring.

Unfortunately, the approach taken by Ambridge – which, I submit, is the de facto approach most school districts take in response to a charter school application – is also stymieing unique and much-needed educational options for students, valuable opportunities for the district to reform, enhance, and sustain its own operations, and unprecedented possibilities for serving the best interests of taxpayers by creating a high-quality, high-performing system of public education that retains local character, and maintains and serves local values.

What difference would an alternative authorizer, be it an institution of higher learning or a state-level body, make in this situation? First of all, it would allow the relative merits of different charter school applications to be fairly considered based solely on the criteria established by the legislature and Department of Education.

The Ambridge presentation on Baden Academy's application, for example, dedicates its first two pages to detailing the potential financial impact of the charter school on the district, even though the current charter school law makes clear that this is not a criterion that should be considered in a school district's review of a charter school application

More importantly, I believe that a university or state-level authorizer would provide charter schools with a level of review, accountability, and support that, generally speaking, does not exist between most traditional school districts and the charter schools that exist within them. I submit that most school districts either maintain an adversarial relationship with the charter schools in their district -- looking for ways to revoke the charter -- or simply ignore them. If a more collegial relationship exists between a charter school and its authorizer, the charter school can be held to the standards set forth in its charter, and be given expert support and direction in the continuous improvement of its operations.

And perhaps most importantly, if a mutually-respectful relationship can be fostered between a charter school and its authorizer, the potential for transferring to the public school system at-large the innovative programs, operational models, and instructional techniques developed in the unique and diverse learning environments charter schools are meant to create, will be greatly enhanced.

In other words, we can learn from each other and make each other better, all for the benefit of Pennsylvania students, taxpayers, and all those who have a vested interest in public education -- which, of course, is all of us.

One final point I would like to make involves a recent change to the House's companion bill to legislation now before you, which would limit the state-authorizer to granting charters only in the lowest-performing school districts in Pennsylvania. With respect, I believe this change is short-sighted, and contrary to the spirit of the charter school model. While providing viable public education alternatives to students trapped in failing school systems is clearly an important role charter schools can and should play, it is not the only purpose charters are intended to serve.

There are students in every school district in Pennsylvania that can be better served by a school model that emphasizes a particular approach or philosophy: students with a strong interest and aptitude in science, technology, engineering, and math that would thrive in a STEM-focused charter school; students who would like to

pursue studies in entrepreneurialism, civics, leadership, economics, world languages, environmental concerns, or the creative and performing arts to a degree

that only a charter school model can fully satisfy; or students on the Autism spectrum that might be better served in a charter school environment especially designed to meet their unique requirements and develop their personal talents and abilities. Limiting the authority of a state-authorizer to only the bottom 10% of school districts will undoubtedly restrict the development of these much-needed educational models.

Echoing the words and sentiments of T.S. Eliot, the late American historian and social critic Russell Kirk thought there should be many different kinds of schools for many different kinds of people. The charter school model provides us with the practical and feasible means for achieving this worthy aim, and the creation of fully-empowered chartering agencies at the university and state-level will provide us with the ability to create and sustain more and better public charter schools.

Thank you.